

BOOK REVIEWS

Against Capitalist Education: What is Education For?

by Nadim Bakhshov

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Review by Andrew L. Hostetler, Vanderbilt University, US

This book is not your typical rant against capitalism. Nadim Bakhshov carefully crafts a conversation between two men to demonstrate his argument. An argument birthed from critique but the author clearly offers a conceptual solution.

Scholars like Richard Brosio (1994) and Peter McLaren (2005) have documented the effects of capitalism on schooling, warned of the pitfalls, and offered insights into ways forward. The critiques of capitalism's influence on education have a history. Alan Griffin (1940) warned of the dangers of conflating a democratic value of freedom as responsible communal living with a capitalist vision of freedom as unregulated living. This work appropriately has focused on making the argument that capitalism is having a negative influence on education and it documents why this is so. This is seemingly to convince a broad audience that what they think is not a problem, in fact is very problematic.

Bakhshov all but skips the initial argument against capitalism's influence. The author devotes one scene out of fifty-five to highlighting the negative effects of capitalism on the world, and positions education—actually the construction of a new educational institution—through conversation and imagination, as the kind of act of world creation that plants the seed of a revolution in our lives (p. xi; p. 7).

Inspired by Plato's Dialogues, Bakhshov has organized his book as a conversation between two professors in a library. Over seven acts and fifty-five scenes, surrounded by students and the narrator, John Thoreau and George R. Wells meet in a library to discuss the philosophy and structure of an educational institution that works counter to capitalism and its influence on education and the world. Plato's Dialogues was in part an effort to avoid telling the reader what to think. Instead the text structure requires readers to think through the conversation and make sense of the ideas on their own. This new book reads with the feel of a similar purpose in its structure. However, the conversational form adopted is not without limitations. Bakhshov situates the cast, somewhat ironically, in a library, the very "museum of thought" John and George criticize as a product of capitalism. Positioned as oppressive to the imagination, if not more. Those working within the structures actively work to suppress or curb the conversation. Librarians—as if they have a hunch that John and George are

threatening the status quo—are subtly framed as authority figures policing the cast. These museums of thought lock away ideas, separate them into disciplines and through peoples’ acceptance and interaction construct an epistemic and ontological hierarchy resulting in the marginalization of humanities and valuing of natural science and technical knowledge viewed as useful to capitalist interests. As a result of this realization, George argued firmly for a global civilization, initially sparked if not achieved through rethinking these structures and the philosophies that underpin them (p. 15).

Bakhshov’s character, George is an optimistic critic. In Act 1 it becomes clear that George was involved in the creation of Westhampton University, a university in a small town just outside of London, UK. The two professors discuss the philosophical underpinnings of Westhampton. With the goal of creating an educational institution to intentionally counter capitalism and work toward a global civilization, the two explore the need for a revolution in and through the human imagination (p. 5). They do this by discussing the limitations of critical theory, pragmatism, and natural science to spur change. George proposes a university built around a “human science.” Here is where the idea pushed me as a reader. I found myself with questions similar to those put forth by John, skeptical and at times dismissive of what the author proposed, and in particular his assertion that a conversation about an imagined university could in fact plant seeds for revolution. This perceived misalignment stuck with me throughout my reading of the book. It was a challenge for me to reconcile the broader goal of the book with the idea that the imagined institution, Westhampton, was built around a new way of knowing the world through a mathematical art George called a human science. A project Bakhshov has been working on for thirty years.

Distinct from the natural sciences this human science is that philosophy and mathematics are intertwined and “traces of a real human science are hidden away in the folds of philosophy, literature, religion, and the political sciences” (p. 46). George continues, “A human science is not just descriptive or explanatory. It is generative, not just predictive. It doesn’t simply observe and test—it generates realities and we, as subjects, situate ourselves in those realities” (p. 48). This new field of study is at the heart of the argument for George. As a philosophy it guides the development of curricula at Westhampton, as a field of study it challenges the existing institutional, epistemic, and ontological structures of a world that not only allows but perpetuates capitalist interests and amplifies the negative social, political, and economic influences of capitalism. Just as I was thinking it, John asked if a human science that seamlessly links humanities and natural sciences was even possible? The conversation unfolds with John and George rationalizing human sciences as pataphysics, after which they move into discussing the goals and leadership structure of Westhampton.

Westhampton would be designed not to prepare students for a job but to free them from the restraints imposed on thought and imagination when the goals of an educational institution are squarely focused on career preparation. Throughout the Acts and Scenes, George and John engage in conversation that draws out substantive critiques of capitalism, corrupt political systems and the affordances and limitations of religion and spirituality. Situating these critiques firmly within the structures of systems and numbers, George argues that the creation of a human science is representative of a broader revolution of all systems. This, I believe, is the core seed of revolution the author speaks to throughout the text. The conceptualization of

Westhampton, for George, is meant to counter a mathematical ontology that values numbers over humanity and leads to mechanization and corruption (p. 64). A question to consider as a result is that if we imagine a world view recognizing and valuing the flow of meaning and complexity of human experience over the deconstruction of experiences into isolated variables with numeric representation, does that equate to working against capitalism?

George and John turn their attention to the need for leadership at Westhampton and the ways systems of organization at universities are often wrought with the same corruption as the larger political systems of society. Leveraging a critique of democracy in practice, namely that it is autocratic at heart, George and John explore options. What is often considered democratic in structure is corrupt at its core and in practice is more of an autocracy or oligarchy. American democracy is a glaring example of this and with the names Clinton and Bush prominent in the current presidential field for 2016 we ask ourselves some difficult questions about the state of the contemporary US democratic republic. Recognizing this limitation both characters engage in thinking through leadership systems at various temporal and spatial scales. As the conversation develops the two men consider various circumstances and their vulnerability to corruption. They discuss various political and economic systems, ranging from capitalism in communist China to Plato's description of tyranny and philosopher-kings to an Athenian style rotation of citizen-leaders. As John and George discuss leadership structures, philosophers, and the potential for corruption the conversation revisits earlier ideas about the fragmentation of knowledge and the role of a human science.

The final acts of the book are devoted to reconciling a clearer conception of human science with the structures of Westhampton. At each philosophical-practical intersection George and John address challenges educational institutions face should they seek to challenge or change the social, political, or economic systems corrupted by capitalism. One way this is accomplished is through an elaborate anecdote told by John about a colleague who faced dismissal from institutional leaders for an anti-capitalist rant and the staff and student activism it inspired. The discussion of leadership at the university rests primarily on what leaders ought not be, or more specifically, what the faculty, staff, and students ought to seek to prevent in relation to the ways capitalism will inevitably corrupt the leaders. George and John go on to finish their conversation by discussing the ways art and music play a role in the interdisciplinary focus of Westhampton. The premise here rests on the need to re-imagine meaning, what it is, and how it is made. Viewing meaning as something that flows through the world, George describes a metaphor where meaning moves through layers of roots and branches (p. 97).

I was challenged throughout this text, but in particular with the introduction of a human science. Initially, it seemed far-fetched to think that a thought experiment between two men conducted as a fish bowl discussion in a university library could meet the substantive demands of planting seeds for revolution. At each impasse, where I found myself questioning the argument or the potential of this text, I reflected on why. Was it possible that the very systems George and John sought to change where the systems working through my thinking to counter their effort? Could it be that who I am as a product of capitalist education—in thinking against the book as I read it—is a part of the corruption that pervades society and works to maintain the status quo? I could not help but consider the ways my own experiences as a resident in this

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system were what made it so easy for me to dismiss the work. And maybe that is the point. What I take from this text is a series of deeply reflective moments about my own positionality, identity, and effort to make change; and a desire now to work against “capitalist education” more actively.

More than most books I have read, this book stretched me. It would be easy to dismiss Bakhshov’s book as inadequate or misaligned. After all how could two professors having a conversation in a library, imagining a counter-capitalist educational institution, lead to any substantive social, political, or economic change? It would be easy to think this was simply another text for the museum of thought. But in my struggle to be open, to give George a chance, I found myself thinking deeply about education and alternatives to schools and colleges as they are.

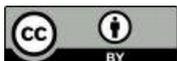
Those who are open might find something in this book worth taking up.

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